Computer Games, Not Computer Movies

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In an essay I read from the defunct *Journal of Computer Game Design*, game designer Chris Crawford referred to computer game developers as having "movie envy." What he meant by this was that many computer game designers often secretly (and sometimes overtly) wish they were making movies instead of games, and as a result try to get their computer games to emulate films. One of his most salient examples was that of scrolling credits in computer games, where the names of the designers, programmers, artists and so forth scroll by the player much as they would at the end of a movie. His conclusion was that "movie envy" has resulted in particularly poor computer games, and that we'd all be better off if game designers concentrated on making games instead of making half-baked movies.

And Crawford is by and large correct: the computer gaming industry is infected with a pretty bad case of movie envy, and it's really not doing any of us any good. *Next Generation* magazine is a perfect example. Generally speaking, the magazine is well written, interesting and informative. It makes the effort to go beyond endless previews of games, often devoting column inches to the people behind the games and what makes the industry tick. Despite its strengths, *Next Generation* almost never gets through an issue without making some reference to how the development of computer games as an art form somehow parallels the artistic development of movies over the course of the twentieth century. And as game developers, we see the fame, widespread appeal and cultural validation that movies have received and, curse it all, we want some of that for ourselves. Many find it tough to work in an industry that so much of the public sees as being without any redeeming artistic value. So we say, "Yeah, we're just like movies, right now is like 1910, and just in a couple of weeks society's gonna come knockin' at our door offering us fame

beyond our wildest dreams and more money than we'll know what to do with. And they'll agree we're art, while they're at it." But this is more wishful thinking than anything else; the similarities between computer games and movies are truly far fewer than the number of differences. As game developers, we need to realize that as of now we're still a fringe art form with little mainstream appeal, and it's really too early to tell whether or not computer games will ever evolve to become the mass media phenomena movies are. And if computer games are destined for cultural dominance, the best way to get there is certainly not by attempting to be second-rate movies.

Similarities

That's not to say that computer games and movies aren't similar in some ways. Most any reasonable person will agree that both are forms of art, since calling something "art" cannot be a quality-based definition if the term is to have any useful meaning. Certainly no one will dispute that both are entertainment. Both films and games are art forms that communicate to the audience using a combination of constantly changing audio and visual information. Both can, but by no means have to, tell stories; just as there's really no story behind games like *Pac-Man*, *Tetris* or even *Doom*, movies don't have to tell stories, as can be witnessed in the work of many experimental filmmakers, such as Bruce Connor. Certainly anyone who has sat through one of Andrei Tarkovsky's more ponderous films will agree there isn't much story to be found in there. Both computer games and film are largely collaborative mediums, where it is extremely difficult - though not impossible - to create a work in the form without the assistance of others. And both are dependent on technology to communicate to their audience, albeit computer games more so than films.

Most interesting to me is that both arise out of other art forms, yet use a means of communication which is significantly different

enough from their stylistic ancestor to cause them to be perceived as a discreet form. Movies arose out of stage plays, and in fact many early films were merely filmed versions of plays, where the camera never moved, there was no editing and the audience's experience was in many ways the same as going to the theater, except with inferior picture quality and no sound. These early films are very far removed from what we think of as movies today, and one could argue that they weren't a separate art form (from stage plays) at all.

Computer games can trace their roots back to games played between multiple humans, whether these are in the form of board games such as *Risk*, *Monopoly* or *Diplomacy*, role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* or the games of "war" that children (and sometimes adults) play with each other. There are some "solitaire" non-computer games, such as the card game of the same name, though solitaire games are the exception to the rule in traditional games. (One may also be able to trace the development of computer games back to the likes of pinball and other coin-operated "amusements." But I think these by and large have little relationship to the games which are being created today, and comparisons with such early forms are more appropriate in the way in which games are sold to the public through arcades than to the actual content and form of computer games.) Similar to movies, many early games, some of which are still very popular today, are little more than straight adaptations of established non-computer game forms. For instance, often when I talk to a non-computer game player and mention that I design computer games for a living, they're bound to say: "Oh, computer games! Those are great! I've got solitaire for my computer and I just play it for hours!" I'm often tempted to answer "That's not really a computer game," conceding that though it is a game and one can play it on one's computer, it's not significantly different from the gaming experience one has if one uses a

deck of cards. In the same way that a static filmed stage play is not really a film - or at least is not different enough to be considered a unique art form - strict adaptations of board or other traditional games to the computer cannot be considered a distinct medium. In order for a game to truly be considered a computer game, for me, it must present a gaming experience which would be impossible without the computer.

It is important to note that computer games did not arise out of movies. Sure, lots of people (many of them "new media" company executives bereft of a clue) have tried to substitute elements of films in place of well conceived game design mechanics and have called the results "interactive movies." Fans have called these products "terrible" and avoided them like the plague. When one gets down to the core of all computer games, when one searches for and locates its archetypal form, one will find that it's based on a game, not a movie. In the case of really bad "interactive movies" it may be based on a ludicrously simple, unfair and 'unfun' game, but it's a game nonetheless. In the final analysis, computer games are as fun and stimulating as their base games are, regardless of what pyrotechnics may be layered on top.

Irreconcilable Differences
So I've listed the similarities between computer games and films that spring to mind. What's different about them, then, you may ask? Everything else, which is quite a lot. The biggest, of course, is interactivity. In films one watches and experiences the art form. In games one acts, watches and experiences the art form. For a film, everyone in the movie theater has the same experience of watching the film: they may enjoy it more or less, some may understand some sections better than others and some may react differently to different stimuli than others. But they've all seen the same thing. In computer games (or well designed ones, at least) nearly every player has a unique experience, which was generated as the result of the actions they chose. In movies the filmmaker only has to worry about one-way communication: how is he going to deliver his message to the audience? In computer games, designers must be concerned with both how information is communicated to the player, as well as how the player communicates back to them via their surrogate, the computer. A computer game that cannot do both output and input well is a failure.

The above observation that the core difference between movies and computer games is interactivity may seem like an obvious statement and, indeed, it is. But enough so-called game designers have missed this obvious-as-the-nose-on-your-face differ-

ence in their attempts to design computer games that it bears repeating. Although Chris Crawford's mention of scrolling credits as a good example of movie envy may have seemed like sarcastic nit-picking, it's actually a pretty good example of how game designers can lose sight of what medium they're working in, as a result of their secret or at least subconscious desire to be making movies. In a film the audience is unable to interact with the projector, and so in order to communicate a long series of names, the filmmaker is reduced to having them scroll slowly in front of the audience. Sure, audience member Joe Bloggs only wants to know who the Best Boy Grip is, but he has to wait for all of the other credits to scroll by to get to his item of interest, due to the limitations of the medium. He has no way of controlling the information presented to him. But in a computer game, the player has control of the game, at least in theory. In a properly designed computer game credits sequence, then, he should be able to scroll or flip through the credits at any speed he wants. When Joe's done reading the first set of credits or if he's only looking for who was the Quality Assurance Lead on the project, he can just flip onto the next screen by pressing a key. Making him sit through scrolling credits in a computer game is absurd, when the very nature of the medium allows him to go looking for exactly the credit he wants to see.

Who Cares About Scrolling Credits?
Of course, scrolling credits can hardly be considered the ruination of a computer game, but what about when the designers put movie-copying elements into other points of the game, where instead of interacting the player spends most of his or her time just watching? Then we end up with bad games, as we've seen time and time again as poorly made movies have been sold to us as hot new games. Still more important is that we must realize that making broad-based comparisons between computer games and movies are hardly useful, and may in many ways be damaging to our understanding of where our art form is and how it should develop. So when someone says that computer games right now are at the same technological level as films were in 1910, careful thought will reveal that this is a ludicrous, absurd and useless statement. How can one compare something so different as movies and computer games in such a manner? It's just about as useful as comparing pulp fiction novels and pop songs: sure there are some similarities, but the two forms are more different than they are similar, and broad-based analogies drawn between them are likely to be useless. At

worst such analogies will lead designers down the wrong paths entirely, serving to hinder the development of games as an art form.

Of course, that's not to say that computer games cannot learn valuable lessons from film, especially in terms of storytelling. When I interviewed game designer Jordan Mechner (most famous for the *Prince of Persia* games) some years ago and asked what he thought of the potential use of film techniques in computer games, he answered: "Film has an incredibly rich vocabulary of tricks, conventions and styles which have evolved over the last hundred years of film making. Some of which have been used in computer games and really work well, others which are waiting for someone to figure out how to use them, and others which don't work very well, and which kill the games they get imported into." Mechner was not talking about merely slamming full motion video sequences into games that don't need them, but rather examining film techniques such as cross-cutting and changing perspective and determining how best these can function in a computer game, if they can function at all.

Abdicating Authorship
Aside from the potential fame and acceptance that designers believe making games more like movies will bring them, I think another force at work here is the game developer's desire for control. In designing a really good computer game which allows the player to explore the gameworld in her own way, the game's designer is giving up some degree of control over how that story will transpire. Whereas an author in a non-interactive medium such as literature or film has total control of the work while the audience is left merely to watch, the audience of computer games is invited to participate in the shape and form of the art they are experiencing. Indeed, the games which provide the most freedom and empowerment for the player, titles such as *The Sims* and *Civilization*, are the games which turn out to have the most lasting appeal for players. The designers of these games, Will Wright and Sid Meier respectively, both understood that they were providing merely a framework on which players could build their own stories. Games that try to force the player to experience only one particular story, as told through long movie-like cut-scenes, tend to have very little appeal at all. As game designer Doug Church put it at a Game Developer's Conference talk, the game designer must abdicate a large part of the game's authorship to the player if he hopes to create the most compelling gaming experience possible. And everyone knows that artists are often the most obsessive control-freaks imagin-

able. No wonder game developers so often tend to drift toward a medium, film, in which they would have total control over the work being created.

A lot of game designers are big fans of movies (as is a very large portion of the population) and I must admit that I'm one of them. Probably I'm a bit more of a fanatical movie buff than most. And I'd be lying if I said that, if someone up and offered me the chance to write and/or direct a film, I wouldn't give the offer serious thought. But right now I've decided to devote my creative energies to the creation of computer games, and I must not try to pursue my potential movie career through the games I design. Because if I did I'd have neither a good computer game nor a good movie, and what good would that be to anyone? Sure computer games and movies have similarities as art forms. But as game developers we must realize what medium we're working in, and understand that designing a good game has very little to do with directing a good movie.

About the Columnist

Richard Rouse III is a computer game designer, programmer and writer at Surreal Software, where his current project seems to be in a state of constant flux. His past design credits include *Centipede 3D, Odyssey - The Legend of Nemesis* and *Damage Incorporated*. At long last, he recently submitted the manuscript for his book, *Game Design: Theory & Practice*, for publication in the first quarter of 2001 by Word-Ware Publishing, **www.wordware.com.**

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